

## The Challenge of Christmas Light

Good morning, and Merry Christmas!

Today is both the first Sunday after Christmas, and the feast day of St. John, the Apostle and Evangelist. Would you join me in praying the collects for each day?

**Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word:  
Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives;**

**Shed upon your Church, O Lord, the brightness of your light, that we, being  
illuminated by the teaching of your apostle and evangelist John, may so walk in the  
light of your truth, that at length we may attain to the fullness of eternal life;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever.**

**Amen.**

Did you catch the repetition in those prayers of the word "light"?

I'm calling this sermon "*The Challenge of Christmas Light.*"

That's the challenge of Christmas LIGHT, not Christmas lightS.

Sorry to disappoint, but this isn't going to be a theological exploration of the difficulties of *decorating*!

Although, if you'll indulge me, let's at least mention the main challenge of Christmas lightS:

Sure, they get tangled,

Yes, they're obnoxious when left up all year long,

But above all else: they are so stinking impractical!

Right?

Christmas lights only *dazzle*.

Unless we're talking about

- *landing strips* for reindeer,
- or the multicolored glow from your tree helping you not to trip on your nighttime walk to the bathroom,

Christmas lights serve no practical purpose.

We use other lights – flashlights, reading lamps, headlights, etc. – for the important tasks of illumination and guidance.

We're talking about this *important* kind of light this morning.

But even the light that illumines and guides can also sting.

I was reminded of this on Christmas Day, when I was privileged to witness Peter and Kristie Smith's two-year-old son, Cohen, open up his very own, *very bright*, flashlight.

Cohen had a great time shining his new flashlight *everywhere*.

And by the end of the evening, all of us, including him, had been reminded that those same 4 LED's – which could guide an entire family through a blackout or a storm – really hurt when they hit you right in the eyes!

Because, you see, light can **guide**, but it can also **sting**. And this is especially true when your eyes have gotten used to darkness.

*Light can guide, but it can also sting, especially when your eyes have gotten used to darkness.*

As St. John puts it 1 John 1:5 –

**“God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.”**

In Genesis 1-2, we read of how God made the world to be a realm of *light*, in which He and His creatures could enjoy unbroken fellowship in each other's presence.

However, since Genesis 3, humans have tragically chosen to try and live **apart** from God's presence – **away** from His light and His glory – in the *shadowlands*, as it were.

To borrow the words of Isaiah 5:20, humans since Genesis 3 are those

**“who call evil good  
and good evil,  
who put darkness for light  
and light for darkness.”**

In Exodus 33, then, Moses' request to see God's glory – to witness God's unmitigated majesty – is both understandable and absurd.

It's understandable because human beings were created to experience God's glory.

It's *good* that Moses wants to be in the presence of God!

But it's also absurd, because Moses, a sinful human being, would be obliterated by God's unmitigated presence.

It would be like taking a person kept under blindfold in a dungeon for her entire life, and making her stare through a telescope at the sun.

Actually, it would be a bit more like trying to *touch* the fiery surface of the sun.

The same star that's the source of light and life on earth would be a bit uncomfortable experienced up close, at 10,000 degrees Fahrenheit.

*Light can guide, and also sting.*

God knows this. Exodus 33:20:

**“you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.”**

Wait. What?

***“You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live”?***

Is Christmas, then, a lie?

You know, all this stuff about Jesus being fully God....

I mean, should the song go:

***“Mary, did you know, that when you kiss your little baby, God’s glory might burn your face off?”?***

Exodus 33:20:

**“You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.”**

John 1:1-4:

**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.**

Exodus 33:20:

**“You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.”**

John 1:14:

**And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.**

Exodus 33:20:

**“You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.”**

1 John 1:1:

**That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.**

**What’s going on?**

Was God only half-serious when speaking to Moses?

Or is he only half-present, maybe even a *third*-present with us in the person of Jesus?

St. John was aware of this tension. John 1:18 says

**“No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.”**

1 John 4:12 repeats the phrase: *“No one has ever seen God.”*

Now, as far as John's writings are concerned, the explanation seems to be that,

while Jesus is **fully** God,  
God is present to **us** in Jesus  
in a **different** way  
than God is present to **Himself**  
as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

So, in a way similar to how Moses survives seeing God's “back,” but not His “face” in Exodus 33, we can survive the presence of the God-Man Jesus Christ, even as we still await the full presence of the Trinity when all things are made new.

That is one fair and biblical answer.

But I'd like to offer you yet another.

Remember: Light can guide, but also sting. Especially when you've gotten used to darkness.

Remember: God is light.

Remember: Jesus is fully God.

Remember: We shall not see God and live, for we have chosen to live in the shadowlands.

I suggest to you that, **to the extent we see and experience God in Jesus Christ, we do die.**

**But we die as shadow-dwellers, and are raised as daughters and sons of the light!**

To the extent we see and experience God in Jesus Christ, we DO DIE.

But we die as shadow-dwellers, and are raised as daughters and sons of the light!

Consider John 1:9-13:

**[In Jesus,] the true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.**

**He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.**

**But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.**

Consider Romans 6:3-5:

**<sup>3</sup> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.**

**<sup>5</sup> For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.**

And consider Ephesians 5:8:

**“for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.”**

This is the challenge of Jesus, the Christmas light:

**To the extent we see and experience God in Jesus Christ, we DO DIE.**

**But we die as shadow-dwellers, and are raised as daughters and sons of the light!**

This logic drives the whole book of 1 John, which, incidentally, begins on page 1021 of your pew Bible.

It's why the first four verses of the letter stress that John is an *eyewitness* of what took place in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

There has been a God-sighting! And therefore everything must change.

A light is now shining in the shadowlands, creating a joyful fellowship of faith –

a life characterized by the same kind of fellowship that takes place between God the Father and God the Son!

One of the central questions that 1 John answers is this:

**How do we know that we are a part of the joyful fellowship of faith, the Church?**

That is: **How do we know that we have seen and experienced God in Jesus Christ?**

**How do we know if we are sons and daughters of the light?**

One of the best things about St. John, in my opinion, is that he's not afraid to talk straight, to tell it like it is.

How do you know if you're a light-child or a shadow-dweller?

Easy. And yet, oh-so-difficult.

**Take a look at your relationship with darkness, with sin.**

**If you are walking in darkness, you are not walking in light.**

**And you must therefore repent, confess, and cling to Jesus.**

Friends, I don't know about you, but here's where the Christmas light *stings* me: my sin. My love for the dark.

But if God's light is going to **guide** us shadow-dwellers, it has to *sting* us first.

***"God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all."***

What does this mean for us?

Well, John himself draws three implications. And he states each first negatively, then positively.

**1. We must walk in the light to experience true fellowship with God and one another (1.6-7)**

What's the negative? Here's what 1 John 1:6 says:

**If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth**

It's no use to deny the relationship-breaking effects of sin, as if God didn't know any better.

That'd be like me covering my eyes and claiming that you can't see me!

It reminds me of Psalm 139. In verses 11-12, David, speaking of trying to flee from God's presence, says:

**If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you."**

God Himself is light. He is not deceived by darkness.

1 John 1:7 gives the positive side:

**But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.**

I don't know about you, but I expected John to say "we have fellowship with GOD." After all, that's what walking in sin *breaks*, right?

Well, yes. But **just as walking in darkness breaks fellowship with both God and humans, walking in the light heals both.**

Here, "*walking in the light*" means living in light of how God has revealed Himself through His Word – through His *written* Word, Holy Scripture, and his *Living* Word, His Son.

Being able to *love what God loves and hate what God hates* requires a cleansing that only Christ's death and resurrection can provide. More on that in a moment.

The second implication of God being light is that

**2. We must confess the guilt of our sins to experience cleansing forgiveness (1.8-9)**

1 John 1:8 says

**If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.**

Based on the usage of the phrase “to have sin” in the Gospel of John (9:41; 15:22, 24; 19:11), the false claim being made here is that one is not guilty of committing sins.

But this is patently false.

Indeed, the only way we could convince ourselves otherwise is if, as the verse states, we were to lie not only to others about our guilty status, but to deceive our very selves.

Tragically, we humans are often such thoroughgoing liars that we can and do deceive ourselves into thinking that we are basically good – that we are children of the light on our own, without God's aid.

The remedy to this tragedy begins with confession.

1 John 1:9 says:

**<sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**

It can be a terrifying truth, but trust me:

- God knows our brokenness,
- He sees our stains more clearly than we ever will.

He Himself is light. It is pointless to lie to Him about our darkness. We must take off our masks and admit our guilt – especially as Christians!

That's why we do so each week as a church, and are supposed to do so each day as individuals and families.

But the amazing fact is: *God is always more ready and able to forgive us than we are ready and able to even ask for forgiveness!*

He is faithful to keep his promises to save and redeem the world.

And He is just, He is righteous, because God Himself died to rescue us from sin's grasp.

More on that in a moment.

Note that this rescue includes not just *forgiveness*, although that would be good enough, but also *cleansing* from all unrighteousness.

An inner transformation, through the power of the Holy Spirit, by which we come to love sin less and less, and to love God more and more.

Praise be to such a **forgiving, cleansing, and gracious** God!

Finally, then:

**3. We must cling to our Righteous Advocate, Jesus Christ, for redemption (1.10-2.2)**

Verse 10 reads:

**If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.**

It's one thing to deny sin's effects. It's another to deny sin's guilt. Here, we hypothetically deny sin's presence in our lives!

And to do so makes God Himself a liar. To do so demonstrates that we do not have His Word in us.

Why? Because His Word so clearly states that we are sinners. It's why the whole divine rescue mission is necessary in the first place!

Psalm 14:3

**They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt;  
there is none who does good,  
not even one.**

Isaiah 64:6

**We have all become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.  
We all fade like a leaf,  
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.**

And I could go on and on...

It's as if the gravity of that last false makes John interrupt his pattern at 2:1:

**My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin.**

That's the goal: freedom, not just from sin's power, but its very presence in our lives!

A noble goal, to be sure. But if John's thought ended there, it would drive us to despair.

A life free from sin? Who is sufficient for this?

Christ is.

So John continues:

**But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. <sup>2</sup>He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.**

We usually think of the Holy Spirit as our advocate, but here Jesus Christ himself is described as the one who never sinned speaking with the Father in defense of those who have.

Furthermore, he can be a perfectly effective advocate because he is also the propitiation, the atoning sacrifice for our sins. That is, Christ's life, death, and resurrection not only remove our guilt of sin, but also God's righteous wrath at our sin.

Now, to some, this seems like a very primitive notion of an arbitrary, angry deity who needs to be appeased.

But keep in mind that God's wrath is not arbitrary. Sin threatens to destroy and undo the world He created and loves. He has every right to consistently hate evil, and He does.

Furthermore, Jesus Christ is not some third party who intervenes between us and the angry God. He himself is God – worthy to judge us and willing to save us!

Consider 1 John 4:10:

**In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.**

As if this weren't a glorious enough truth, Jesus is the propitiation not for our sins only, **but also for the sins of the whole world.**

This does not mean that Christ's death automatically redeems every sinner.

As we've seen, confession, repentance, and faith are required.

We are "free" to refuse freedom, and to stubbornly walk in the darkness while the light shines on...

But we are also free to take off our masks, confess our sins, and receive true forgiveness, true cleansing, and true redemption.

"But," you might be thinking, "you don't know what I've done in the shadows."

You're right.

I don't.

But God already does.

And he still sent his Son to rescue you from your darkness, your sins.

And Christ's blood is a powerful enough detergent to wash away the guilty stains of the entire world – yours and mine included.

**To the extent we see and experience God in Jesus Christ, we do die.**

**But we die as shadow-dwellers, and are raised as daughters and sons of the light!**

Today, and every day, may we walk in the light by confessing our sins and clinging to Christ.

Amen.